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Aron Ralston, 27, waited five days to be rescued before he cut off his right arm below the elbow. (The arm had been pinned by a rock.) Ralston then walked five miles before a helicopter team saw him.

An audacious climber's brutal move to survive

By Stephanie Simon and J. Michael Kennedy
PHOTO BY JAMES HAMILTON

DENVER — His right arm was pinned beneath an 800-pound boulder. His water bottle was empty. It did not seem likely that a rescue crew could ever spot him in the narrow slit of the desert in southeast Utah. So Aron Ralston took out his pocketknife and amputated his arm below the elbow. Then he rigged anchors into the cliff, fastened a rope, and rappelled 60 feet to the canyon floor. Heading heavily through a makeshift maze of boulders, Ralston began to hike.

He had walked about five miles when a helicopter search team spotted him Thursday afternoon on a trail through Canyonlands National Park. He was exhausted and dehydrated — but still pushing forward.

"You got to hang in there," park ranger Glenn Sherrell said. "That's true grit."

On Friday, Ralston was recovering from surgery at a Colorado hospital. And his friends were predicting that he would return to the mountain wilderness the first chance he gets.

"I expect him to be out there, doing everything he ever did," John Fielder, a nature photographer, said.

Ralston, 27, is an audacious mountaineer who has climbed 50 of Colorado's highest peaks. An article this spring in his hometown paper, the Aspen Times, described him climbing alone, in midwinter, in the dead of night, without cell phone, radio, beacon or rope. A mechanical engineer by training, an explorer in spirit, Ralston routinely pushes his body over ice-slick cliffs. He declines to stand alone at a 14,000-foot summit as lightning crashes around him, and as gray wolves howl from distant ledges.

The adventure that ended with his self-amputation was supposed to have been a modest one: a bike ride up a canyon, then a hike down through the sculpted sandstone bluffs on a bright spring Saturday. The round trip would take perhaps eight hours. Ralston thought so little of it, he didn't bother to give his roommate a detailed itinerary, as was his practice on mountain climbs.

He completed the ride without incident and left his bike at the top, planning to drive up in his truck later to retrieve it. On the way down, he used rock-climbing equipment to navigate the narrow passages of Blue John Canyon — which in places is just three feet wide. After an hour or two, he came to a giant boulder wedged in the canyon, according to Sherrell, the park ranger.

Ralston scrambled over the boulder and was lowering himself down when it shifted, pinning his arm. He managed to maneuver his feet so he was standing upright. But he could not move.

Authorities said he used his climbing gear to rig a webbed sling so he could try to push the rock away with his feet. It was too heavy. He stood there, trapped, for five days.

On Thursday, he ran out of water. On Thursday he "realized that his survival required drastic action," according to a statement by the sheriff's office in Esmer County, Utah.

He used his pocketknife to free himself the only way he could, by cutting off part of his arm. "Though such brutal surgery is hard to imagine, others in desperate straits have done it, managing to sever the muscles and tendons that attach limbs to joints with a modest jackknife."

It is unclear whether Ralston hacked through his bone or whether the bone had been crushed by the boulder.

Once he had completed the job, he used his first-aid kit to tie a tourniquet around his biceps. Then he rappelled down the cliff — and started walking.

"His instinct for survival was great," Fielder said.

Hours later, Ralston met two hikers in Hermeshoe Canyon. They gave him water and walked with him until they could flag down a helicopter from the Utah Department of Public Safety. Ralston's coworkers had alerted the mountain rescue crew just that morning that he had not shown up for work all week.

He was obviously in major distress, having cut his own arm off, but he was still ambulatory," park ranger Jim Block said.

Ralston remained conscious through the brief helicopter ride to Allen Memorial Hospital in Moab, Utah, and walked into the emergency room on his own. He was later flown to St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Junction, Colo.

Rescuers returned to the canyon later to try to retrieve the amputated limb; they saw it, but couldn't budge the boulder.

"It's a phenomenal story, but Aron is a phenomenal person," said Tim Martin, the Aspen Times reporter who profiled Ralston.

Ralston underwent surgery Thursday night and is in serious condition in the intensive care unit. His "griets are high and he's anxious to look forward to returning to his love of the outdoors," his mother, Debra Ralston, said in a statement Friday.

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